

Public libraries and their contribution to a civil society

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1. Introduction

Societies are changing continuously. Who would doubt such a statement? Although permanent social change is evident, speed and profundity of change can vary enormously. We are in a period of accelerated change. Different causes have to be taken into account. On the one hand we notice the aftermath of digital technologies and global networking based on these technologies: the emergence of the Internet is one of the most spectacular consequences of the digital revolution. This revolution has just started a couple of years ago and what we are able to observe presumably still is the initiation of a continuing period of rapid change. Sociologists describe this development as a new model of society. They identify the information society replacing the industrial society (Webster 2002). Manuel Castells elaborated his concept of a network society based on global networking, internet and digital technologies (Castells 1996).

On the other hand more and more citizens in democratic societies have called for more transparency and participation in political decision-making for decades. They are disappointed by systems of mere representative democracy and long for more involvement of the public. This trend towards participation could result in what is called “civil society”. The phrase “civil society”, although already coined by Adam Ferguson in the 18th century, was newly adopted in the 1980s and 1990s. Nowadays “civil society” is loaded with different meanings: it describes

- a. the sphere outside of state, market and family
- b. the private sphere as the third sector of society, distinct from government and economy (What is Civil Society 2003) and
- c. individuals and organizations like NGOs which are independent of the government (Civil Society 2012) and thus are able to counterbalance the superiority of public authorities. Their social and political commitment is dedicated to democracy, solidarity, social justice and human rights and it is based on voluntarism (Gärtner 2008).

The rising popularity of “civil society” as a concept and model of a modern democratic system is without doubt connected to fundamental trends in the information society and to globalization as a persistent process. But as these ideas were created and continuously discussed long before the invention of digital media, they should be treated discretely. Public libraries are operating in an environment definitely affected by the above trends. Of course we have to take into account that countries and societies all over the world are influenced by these trends to different degrees. One might object and argue that some African or Asian societies still could be identified as agricultural societies which are not at all penetrated by digital technologies, the Internet, etc.

But the claim should be pushed to bridge the worldwide digital divide and to facilitate these countries to catch up with global trends regarding the information society and political participation of the third sector. If these claims, already discussed and adopted by the World Summits on the Information Society in Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005, are successful (Kuhlen 2004), today’s agricultural societies will have the chance to become information societies, to overcome the digital divide step by step and to develop patterns of a civil society sooner or later.

It is important to emphasize that there is no single model of either information society or civil society that fits for all societies of the world in the same way. Instead, it will be the task of each country, each nation and each culture to adapt the main principles to its own culture and mentality and to detect the chances and challenges that an information society and respectively civil society will provide.

A brilliant step to this area of localising global or general models in our field with regard to Africa has been made with the “African Conference on Information Ethics” held in Pretoria, February 3-5, 2007. The proceedings have been online since 2009 (Africa Reader on Information Ethics 2009), a printed version is supposed to be issued soon. The conference’s main subjects were, among others, “cultural diversity and globalization” (Udeani 2009) and “e-government and information democracy vs. digital divide” (Ngulube 2009, Carbo 2009, Boekhorst 2009, Himma 2009). Interesting thoughts were presented with regard to the relations of intellectual property, traditional resources rights and natural law (Gathegi 2009) or the special role of indigenous knowledge (Moahi 2009).

This might serve as an example for the need to constantly localize, adapt and modify general concepts and abstract models. On the other hand there is a fundamental need to define and determine core values of library work. These ethical values in a most general way sometimes are described as “freedom, equity, and inclusion” (Lor 2009, S. 188). In the following a concept of the main functions and missions of public libraries in 21st century societies will be presented.

In a next step it will be demonstrated by means of a brief comparison with the latest draft of IFLA’s Code of Ethics for Librarians (2012) that these basic missions are not compiled arbitrarily but derive from basic ethical values connected to libraries and librarians.

2. Public libraries and their core mission and functions in 21st century information societies

As mentioned above, ethical values should determine the work of librarians and their institutions. Libraries are social institutions, it is their task to provide services, products and offers required by their social environment. As society is in a permanent flux, technological innovations, economic and cultural shifts modify public and private life non-stop, libraries have to monitor these changes efficiently and continuously. They aim at meeting the most current needs of society with their library services. A most convincing example is the fight of illiteracy and digital divide via library programs. Public libraries have devoted themselves to the promotion of literacy for more than 150 years. With the advent of digital media and the Internet it became evident that citizens would need new skills in the future if they wanted to participate in the new information world. This is why libraries started to provide information literacy programs and to emerge as teaching libraries. In summary, we can state that libraries and especially public libraries act in a threefold dependency: concept, core values and social trends/requests. In the following, the concept, i.e. the core mission and functions of public libraries, will be outlined with regard to 14 different aspects (cf. Rösch 2012, Public library service 2001).

Basic information supply

Public libraries provide access to information in general. They respond to the particular information needs of individuals (cf. Alexandria Manifesto 2005) and provide access to printed media, to digital media and of course to the Internet. Thus, they deliver an important contribution to the basic information supply of citizens. As an obligatory precondition library

collections and information provided have to be free of censorship and they have to represent the broad range of opinions. Another prerequisite is to define public libraries as public space. They have to be accessible for all members of society alike. This implies the use of collections and services free of charge. If fees are inevitable they have to be as low as possible and make sure that special clauses allow even people with lowest income to use the library. Thereby public libraries deliver an important contribution to Art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR): “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Libraries are dedicated to basic information supply along with mass media like TV and radio stations, newspapers, Internet companies and so on. Yet, the unique feature of libraries is their political, ideological and economic independence and their obligation to neutrality and pluralism.

Improvement of political participation

Vital democratic systems require a well-informed citizenry. To be able to form a political will and to participate in democratic decision-making citizens must have unrestricted access to all the information needed and related to subjects of public and individual interest. This implies the absence of censorship in any form. Libraries have to adopt a non-biased attitude and to provide the broad range of opinions. A second obligation consists in their role as transparency institutions. As such they “should collect information materials issued by official bodies, particularly those that deal with citizens’ rights and entitlements” (IFLA Manifesto on Transparency 2008). If citizens don’t have the chance to access official sources, material of anti-corruption NGOs and other relevant sources at the same time an informational dissymmetry will come into being which hinders or even prohibits political participation and democratic control of the authorities.

An improvement of political participation via library services requires libraries which are free of commercialization and ideological biases. Libraries have to serve as a kind of informational shelter for all their users. The relation between the library and their users has to be one of strict confidentiality, secrecy and respect of privacy. It must be guaranteed to users that their personal data remain secret and will be protected in principle. Thus, the library will be a place where citizens are able to access information of their choice without any restrictions.

Commitment to quality

With their collection of printed and digital material the library makes “available the most accurate and unbiased educational, scientific and technical, and socially relevant information to each and everyone” (ILFA Manifesto on Transparency 2008). Library collections and their maintenance should be shaped by professional and transparent selection criteria. This makes the library a place to find trusted information quality. Due to an intelligent balance of mainstream and minority interests libraries provide a wide range of manifold material and services. This makes a crucial difference between libraries on the one hand and bookshops, video stores and commercial information providers on the other hand. Beyond their collections and other recommended material libraries provide access to any information sources freely available via the Internet.

Commitment to pluralism and neutrality of services and collections

Collections and services of public libraries provide access to information sources of all kind. They have to be characterized by ideological, religious and economic independence. Although it is clear that “neutrality” in a strict sense of the word is hardly ever attainable, libraries and librarians are obliged to strive for neutrality and an unbiased stance as much as possible. The

more libraries see themselves as places of resistance to any kind of censorship and any limitation of the freedom of opinion and access to information as guaranteed in Art. 19 of the UNDHR, the more will the public recognize libraries as a corner stone of a civil society and a vital democratic system. This requires libraries, librarians and their professional associations to be understood as advocates of intellectual freedom in public disputes. As such libraries have to be visible and proactive. They have to comment on current conflicts such as WikiLeaks, data retention, SOPA, ACTA, CIPA, the Digital Economy Act or unbalanced copyright restrictions in the interest of publishers and the information industry.

Social inclusion and integration of minorities and immigrants

Public libraries are among those few institutions which are able to contribute to social inclusion as well as to integration of minorities and immigrants. They facilitate social inclusion through offering media in the native languages of ethnical minorities and immigrants. In addition they organize events, exhibitions and meetings with regard to the cultural backgrounds of these groups. In order to promote their integration into society and to ensure their equal status and equal treatment libraries provide language courses and further media to introduce language, culture, legal, political and social basics of the national society. Yet another aspect of social integration is the library's function as a meeting place for people from different ethnical groups, cultural backgrounds and social levels. The aim is not to bring forward a homogenous society but a multifaceted, multicultural and most tolerant society based on common values and mutual respect. All parts of society should be connected and have the chance to get or stay in contact with each other. Public libraries present excellent characteristics pursuing this objective.

Emancipation of underprivileged groups in society

Libraries are involved in social, cultural and economic well-being and therefore have social responsibility. With their collections and their services public libraries have great potential to provide an important contribution to the assistance of underprivileged individuals and classes. By promoting reading skills and information literacy and by encouraging people in the use the library they help to improve the chances of advancement and independence. Target groups of related services are for instance immigrants, unemployed persons, elderly people, physically and mentally handicapped people or people with low income and a lower level of education. It depends on the social environment of each library which of these and related target groups should be supported with special library services. It is obvious that most libraries will not be able to provide special services for all these groups. But this might not serve as an excuse. In this case libraries have to find out which group or groups are the most relevant and develop special services for selected target groups.

Promotion of reading and literacy

Public libraries have always had a crucial role in the promotion of reading and literacy. From the 19th century on they have dedicated much of their work to fight illiteracy and to convince people of the advantages of reading. It is their special task to lead children and adolescents to reading and to strengthen their willingness to read even longer documents or novels. In many countries it is still an important task to reduce the rate illiterate citizens by literacy programs. But even in European and American societies a noteworthy part of the population only has the lowest level of literacy at their disposal (in Germany and the USA approx. 14%; cf. Rösch 2012, 17). These people are not able to read longer documents and their chances to get and maintain jobs are as limited as their possibilities to participate in public life and political decisions. It remains an important task of public libraries to provide literacy programs and to increase reading skills.

Promotion of information literacy

Beyond reading skills information literacy is crucial for citizens to be able to take advantage of digital media and the Internet. Effective use of information resources in an information society requires the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and create, use and communicate information. Libraries offer information literacy programs promoting these skills. Thus, they provide a significant contribution to overcome the digital divide and the information inequality that results from it (Alexandria Manifesto 2005).

Furthermore, libraries promote an ethical use of information; they help to eliminate plagiarism and other forms of misuse of information. It is obvious that information literacy programs should be tailored to the specific needs of each target group. These programs are often created and provided in cooperation with schools and other educational institutions.

Promotion of professional development

As social change and technical development accelerate enormously in information societies citizens have to update their knowledge and skills constantly. Social and professional environments change rapidly. This is why there is a growing need for further education and professional development. To express this challenge the phrase “lifelong learning” was coined. It is a basic task of public libraries to provide access to all material needed for training, further and advanced education. Part of this mission is to provide relevant sources including even expensive information sources like databases, journals and textbooks free of charge. This is another contribution of public libraries to the improvement of chances of advancement for people with low income or other disadvantages. At the same time it enables older jobholders to update their knowledge and thus to maintain their employment.

Access to scientific knowledge for citizens and non-scholars

This is a task for larger public libraries in particular. They supply citizens, business companies, institutions, organizations or associations with the information needed. This of course includes scholarly information. The coverage of scientific information in public libraries' collections is limited in most cases. Relief can be produced by library consortia that cooperatively license and thus provide access to costly databases. Further solutions consist in cooperative reference and information services like for instance QuestionPoint, document delivery services and interlibrary loan. In areas where there is hardly ever a chance to access scientific information sources public libraries contribute to the popularization and democratization of scientific knowledge. The more libraries are interconnected and act as a system, the easier it will be even for small libraries to provide access to scientific information sources.

Cultural education

Public libraries do have the mission to support citizens in their efforts to improve their cultural education and to develop or maintain their cultural identity. This task is more difficult than it may sound at first sight. On the one hand libraries as service institutions have to respect and to pay tribute to mainstream interests and to meet the needs of the mass audience. On the other hand they should provide media and services tailored to cultural minorities and subcultures. To find a proper balance between these demands is a tightrope walk. Public libraries should avoid paternalism and attempts of heteronomy. At the same time they should not abandon their educational and cultural mission. In successfully contributing to both requirements public libraries support the social cohesion of even multilayered societies.

Entertainment and hobbies

Public libraries devote a noteworthy part of their collections and services to entertainment, hobbies and leisure time. As means for a pleasant and enriching way of spending leisure time

they offer light fiction, music, movies, games, etc. as printed or digital copies. Unless media for certain hobbies are requested, further genres like non-fiction books, popular science media, special interest journals and the like come into consideration. The importance of serving “entertainment and hobbies” should not be underestimated. Their significance and impact can only be valued by the users themselves. It is the task of public libraries to enable citizens to structure their leisure time in a self-determined, competent and independent way.

Support in coping with everyday life

Citizens often need assistance in questions related to tenancy laws, housekeeping, equipment, power saving, education, balanced diet, physical health and so on. For this sake public libraries provide guidebooks and similar media to facilitate citizens coping with everyday life. Thus, libraries help people to overcome challenges and difficulties of everyday life, enabling citizens to orientate themselves and to get the information needed before decisions have to be made. In many cases it makes sense for public libraries to cooperate with organizations committed to consumer protection, job services, educational guidance, etc.

Meeting place and centre of communication

When the Internet became popular some voices predicted that the cyberspace would make library buildings dispensable. Twenty years later digital and virtual services of libraries are well accepted. In addition in most countries more users visit library buildings even more frequently than they did in the pre-Internet era. Libraries offer unique features. They are places free of commercial and ideological biases where visitors can meet like-minded people as well as members of different generations or of different cultural, social or ethnic milieus. Libraries support the chances to meet other people by organizing discussion meetings, presentations, lectures, library nights or exhibitions. The library as a meeting place contributes to the efforts of improving the social cohesion of modern information societies.

3. Ethical values and the core mission of public libraries

Two years ago IFLA has started to create an international Code of Ethics for Librarians. After having endorsed the latest draft in spring, the GB will present the document to the public at the forthcoming World Library and Information Conference in Helsinki. I will now introduce the main ethical values covered by this code and refer them to the core mission of public libraries mentioned above.

IFLA’s code is divided into six sections:

1. Access to information
2. Responsibilities towards individuals and society
3. Privacy, secrecy and transparency
4. Open Access and intellectual property
5. Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills
6. Colleague and employer/employee relationship

In the given context sections 1, 2, 3 and 5 are most important while sections 4 and 6 are less directly involved. The table below allocates core missions and ethical values of public libraries according to IFLA’s Code of Ethics as follows:

Mission / function	Core values
Basic information supply	Access to information (1) Freedom of censorship (1)

	Enhancement of democracy (1) Pluralism (5) Neutrality (5) Transparency (3)
Improvement of political participation:	Informed participation (1) Enhancement of democracy (1) Access to information (1) Freedom of censorship (1) Transparency (3)
Commitment to quality	Pluralism (3) Neutrality (5) Transparency (3) Highest standards of service (5) Excellence in professional skills (5)
Commitment to pluralism and neutrality of services and collections	Access to information (1) Freedom of censorship (1) Pluralism (5) Neutrality (5) Unbiased stance (5)
Social inclusion and integration of minorities and immigrants	Promote inclusion (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Equitable services for everyone (2) Access to information (1) Provision of services free of cost (1) Social responsibility (2) Respect language minorities (2) Support users' information autonomy (2)
Emancipation of underprivileged groups in society	Social responsibility (2) Equitable services for everyone (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Access to information (1) Provision of services free of charge (1) Fair service policies (5) Support users' information autonomy (2)
Promotion of reading and literacy	Services to increase reading skills (2) Social responsibility (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Informed participation (1) Enhancement of democracy (1)
Promotion of information literacy	Promote information literacy (2) Promote ethical use of information (2) Social responsibility (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Informed participation (1) Enhancement of democracy (1)
Promotion of professional development	Access to information (1) Social responsibility (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Equitable services for everyone (2)
Access to scientific knowledge for citizens and non-scholars	Access to information (1) Social responsibility (2)

	Access to information (1) Transparency (3) Promotion of principles of Open Access (4)
Cultural education	Access to information (1) Social responsibility (2) Educational mission (2) Equitable services for everyone (2)
Entertainment and hobbies	Access to information (1) Social responsibility (2) Service orientation (5) Educational mission (2)
Support in coping with everyday life	Social responsibility (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Educational mission (2)
Meeting place and centre of communication	Social responsibility (1) Equitable services for everyone (2) Eradicate discrimination (2) Privacy (3)

4. Conclusion

The comparison and allocation of the core mission of public libraries as listed above and the ethical values as covered in IFLA's Code of Ethics draft are proof of the huge potential public libraries have in contributing to civil societies in a unique way. It shows that the mentioned missions and functions are based on ethical values. Nevertheless the functional model has to be adapted to and to be localized in each country or culture separately. Yet, it seems worth to debate the current and potential role of public libraries in relation to civil society and to an enhancement of democracy grounding on models like the above.

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